02/27/24 BIG TECH

West Virginia Lawmakers Pass Bill Allowing Religious Exemptions for School Vaccine Requirements + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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West Virginia Lawmakers Pass Bill Allowing Religious Exemptions for School Vaccine Requirements

ABC News reported:

> The West Virginia House of Delegates passed a bill Monday that will eliminate school vaccine requirements for those who claim religious exemptions, but only for some schools.
>
> Last week, the House began considering the bill, known as HB 5105, which proposed eliminating vaccine requirements for public virtual schools that do not take part in extracurricular activities or sports in public school settings.
>
> The bill was then expanded to propose "eliminating the vaccine

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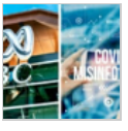
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requirements for students of public virtual schools, private schools, or parochial schools unless the student participates in sanctioned athletic events, and creating a religious exemption from vaccine requirements," and then further amended to specifically allow vaccine exemptions "any child whose parents or guardians present a letter stating that a child cannot be vaccinated for religious reasons."

It's unclear if the religious exemption will apply to students attending in-person public schools. The bill will now head to the Senate for debate and, if it passes in that chamber, to the desk of Gov. Jim Justice for signing into law.

Prior to this bill, West Virginia had no non-medical vaccine exemptions from school vaccine requirements, either for religious or philosophical beliefs, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Dr. Phil Torches 'The View' Co-Hosts Over Impact of COVID Lockdowns on Kids: 'That's a Fact'

The Daily Wire reported:

Dr. Phil McGraw slammed the leftist co-hosts of ABC's "The View" this week during an intense discussion about the impacts of COVID lockdowns on school children. McGraw said that the mental health of children largely began declining in 2008 with the advent of smartphones and social media.

"In like '08, '09, smartphones came in and kids stopped living their lives and started watching people live their lives," he said. "So we saw the biggest spike and the highest levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidality since records have ever been kept. And it's just continued on and on and on."

"And then COVID hits 10 years later and the same agencies that knew that are the agencies that shut down the schools for 2 years," he continued.

Co-host Sunny Hostin snapped back, "There was also a pandemic going on and they were trying to save their lives." McGraw fired back, noting that school-aged children were not dying from the pandemic. Co-host Ana Navarro asked McGraw: "Are you saying no schoolchildren died of COVID?"

"I'm saying it was the safest group," McGraw responded. "They were the less vulnerable group, and they suffered and will suffer more from the mismanagement of COVID than they will from the exposure to COVID, and that's not an opinion, that's a fact."

COVID Vaccine Mandate 'Unlawful' for Queensland Emergency Services, Court Rules

The Guardian reported:

COVID-19 vaccine mandates for Queensland police and ambulance workers were made unlawfully, the state's supreme court has found.

The court on Tuesday delivered its judgments in three lawsuits brought by 86 parties against Queensland's police ambulance services for their directions to workers issued in 2021 and 2022.

The prior directions required emergency service workers to receive COVID vaccines and booster shots or face potential disciplinary action up to and including termination of employment.

The court found the police commissioner, Katarina Carroll, failed to give proper consideration to human rights relevant to the decision to issue the

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vaccine mandate.

Unintended Consequences of NZ's COVID Vaccine Mandates Must Inform Future Pandemic Policy — New Research

The Conversation reported:

> One of the more controversial policies implemented during the height of the pandemic was the vaccine mandates. Thousands of workers across a range of professions had to get vaccinated to keep their jobs.
>
> Our research looked at whether these vaccine mandates increased COVID-19 vaccination rates among these workers, and what their employment, earnings and workplace experiences were.
>
> The stated purpose of the mandates was to increase vaccination rates among these workers to ensure the continuity of public services.
>
> In reality, the mandates had limited effect on increasing vaccine uptake. But they had a substantive negative effect on the employment, earnings and well-being of unvaccinated health workers.

The Future of Censorship Is AI-Generated

TIME reported:

> How the "guardrails" of GenAI are defined and deployed is likely to have a significant and increasing impact on shaping the ecosystem of information and ideas that most humans engage with. And currently, the loudest voices are those that warn about the harms of GenAI, including the mass production of hate speech and credible disinformation. The World Economic Forum has even labeled AI-generated disinformation the most severe global threat here and now.
>
> Ironically the fear of GenAI flooding society with "harmful" content could also take another dystopian turn. One where the guardrails erected to keep the most widely used GenAI systems from generating harm turn them into instruments of hiding information, enforcing conformity, and automatically inserting pervasive, yet opaque, bias.
>
> But as the integration of GenAI becomes ubiquitous in everyday technology it is not a given that search, word processing, and email will continue to allow humans to be fully in control. The perspectives are frightening. Imagine a world where your word processor prevents you from analyzing, criticizing, lauding, or reporting on a topic deemed "harmful" by an AI programmed to only process ideas that are "respectful and appropriate for all."
>
> Hopefully, such a scenario will never become reality. But the current over-implementation of GenAI guardrails may become more pervasive in different and slightly less Orwellian ways. Governments are currently rushing to regulate AI. Regulation is needed to prevent real and concrete harms and safeguard basic human rights. But regulation of social media — such as the EU's Digital Services Act — suggests that regulators will focus heavily on the potential harms rather than the benefits of new technology. This might create strong incentives for AI companies to keep in place expansive definitions of "harm" that limit human agency.

Google Is Under Attack in the Wake of Its 'Woke' AI Disaster

Insider reported:

> Google has more than 90% of the search market, giving it dominant control over the world's information flow online.

As its AI becomes an increasingly important tool in helping users find information, the company plays an outsized role in ensuring facts are surfaced accurately. But there are mounting concerns that Google's AI model has been neutered in a way that leads it to generate inaccuracies and withhold information instead.

The first major signs of this emerged last week, as users of Google's AI model Gemini reported issues with its image-generation feature after it failed to accurately depict images requested of it.

David Sacks, a venture capitalist at Craft Ventures, points the finger of blame for Gemini's issues at Google's culture. "The original mission was to index all the world's information. Now they are suppressing information. The culture is the problem," he told a podcast last week.

Cyberattack Stalls Prescription Dispensing at UnitedHealth

U.S. News & World Report reported:

For nearly a week, prescription drug orders have been disrupted at thousands of pharmacies as the largest health insurer in the United States tries to fully restore services following a cyberattack.

The security breach was first detected last Wednesday at Change Healthcare, a division of UnitedHealth Group, and two senior federal law enforcement officials told the New York Times that the hackers appear to be from another country.

In a filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, UnitedHealth Group said it had been forced to disconnect some of Change Healthcare's vast digital network from its clients, and it hasn't yet been able to restore all of those services.

Change Healthcare handles roughly 15 billion transactions a year, representing nearly one in three U.S. patient records, the Times reported.

This latest cyberattack underscores the vulnerability of healthcare data, particularly the privacy of patients' personal information.

Visa Applies for Biometric Authentication Patent

Reclaim the Net reported:

Visa — one of the world's two biggest payment processors — appears to be moving into biometric data-based authentication, at least according to a patent it has applied for. And Visa claims that this would be fully privacy-friendly.

Visa is in this way joining Mastercard, but also Microsoft and Google, who are all exploring ultimately similar methods, for the sake of what they say is preventing physical data theft and abuse of deepfakes.

If Visa's patent — designed, according to the giant's filing, to provide "biometric templates for privacy-preserving authentication" — is approved and implemented, the end result would be the replacement of PINs with biometric identification.

The method would be used at ATMs and payment checkouts, and Visa made sure to note that the technology's use can be extended to unlocking apartments or letting people into venues like theaters, amusement parks, etc.

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